

Love Your Mouth (Teeth AND Gums!)

February is National Children's Dental Health Month—sort of like the Super Bowl of children's dental health organizations. But it is also gum Disease Awareness Month and—although gum disease is mostly considered a health problem for adults—it is equally, if not more, important to also teach kids to take care of their gums. Children eventually grow into adults, after all.

According to the CDC, half of adults have advanced gum disease, setting themselves up for future tooth loss. Perhaps if we stressed the importance of taking care of our gums as much as we do preventing cavities, this would not be the case.

For as much as we urge children to brush in order to avoid cavities, one could argue that the gums are far more important than teeth and should receive as much, if not more, attention than teeth. Here's why:

Bad Breath.

Let's start with the most superficial of all the reasons to take care of your gums—bad breath. Funky odors from bacteria and your smelly lunch don't only live on your teeth, they're embedded in the soft tissue—your gums, tongue and cheeks. Brushing only removes bacteria from 25% of your mouth. Taking care to remove the plaque (which harbors bacteria) and food particles that get trapped beneath the gum line around each tooth is essential to avoid bad breath. Brushing and mouthwash help to clean some of the soft tissue in your mouth, but it is necessary to clean beneath your gum line with dental floss or other tools that are designed to make it easier to clean

hard-to-reach areas. (More on that, below.)

Bone Loss.

Your gums protect the bones that hold your teeth in place. If you don't remove the bacteria that lives beneath your gum line, you will develop an infection called gingivitis. The telltale signs include puffy, bleeding gums. This is the first stage of gum disease. If left untreated, the second stage sets in—periodontitis, where the gum line starts to recede, or pull away from the tooth, leaving gaps or “pockets” that trap more food and bacteria, leading to bone loss. Not only can this affect the shape of your face and jaw, but it will eventually cause your tooth to become loose and fall out (if it hasn't already been lost to decay.) Adding insult to injury, replacing the tooth and bone can cost thousands of dollars.

Your Overall Health.

If the thought of someday losing your teeth is not enough to convince you to take better care of your gums by flossing daily and visiting your dentist twice each year, consider the impact your gums have on your overall health. Infections in your gums can easily get into your bloodstream or be inhaled into the lungs causing respiratory infections. In addition, gum disease is believed



to cause inflammation throughout the body that is linked to cardiovascular disease, dementia, diabetes, complications during pregnancy, rheumatoid arthritis and more.

Cancer.

Not only have researchers found a higher susceptibility to develop kidney cancer, pancreatic cancer and blood cancers among those with gum disease, but you can also get cancer in the soft tissue of your mouth. Although it may be tempting to skip your regular trip to the dentist because your teeth “look fine”, your dentist is not only concerned about the condition of your teeth. During your visit you will also be screened for any early signs of oral cancer.

So why, even after learning this information do so many adults still skip dental visits and refuse to floss every day as they should? Perhaps these good habits were simply never instilled in them at

an early age. Or maybe it’s because they’ve tried to stick to flossing before but failed. (To find tips on how to make flossing a habit that sticks as well as alternative ways to clean beneath your gum line, read *How to Teach Your Kids Healthy Habits*, link provided below.)

Since oral health habits are often established during childhood, it is essential to teach kids about the importance of flossing, just as much as we stress that they brush their teeth. The lifelong impact to the cost of their oral health as well as the impact to their overall health and wellbeing is worth the effort. For ideas, read *30 Fun Ways to Teach Kids About Oral Health*, link provided below.)

Want more great oral health tips and resources?

Get a smile in your inbox! Sign up for one of our fun and informative, quarterly newsletters at AmericasToothFairy.org.

Sources:

American Academy of Periodontology:

Periodontal Disease Fact Sheet: perio.org/newsroom/periodontal-disease-fact-sheet

Periodontal Disease and Systemic Health: perio.org/consumer/gum-disease-and-other-diseases

How to Teach Your Kids Healthy Habits: americastoothfairy.org/news/how-to-teach-your-kids-healthy-habits

30 Fun Ways to Teach Kids About Oral Health: www.americastoothfairy.org/news/30-fun-ways-to-teach-kids-about-oral-health



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